

Magical evening welcomed home New Hampshire soldiers

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Last week was a stellar week for Nashua. Oct. 25 was a cold dark evening, but Nashua High School South was ablaze with lights. The gym was filled with electricity and emotion.

The Bravo Company 1st Battalion 25th Marines were on their way home. They had spent seven months in Iraq in the city of Fallujah.

Bravo Company secured the rail center in Fallujah and used it as their base of operations. From there they conducted daily patrols and checkpoints, engaging and capturing enemy forces and training Iraqi security forces.

Several of the Marines were injured from IEDs and small arms fire, and two Marines were killed. Capt. John McKenna IV and Lance Cpl. Michael Glover made the ultimate sacrifice on Aug. 16.

Bravo Company is part of the 1st Battalion 25th Marines. The battalion had Marine Reservists from other New England states, who also suffered casualties.

The Marines flew from Iraq to Camp Pendleton, Calif. They later flew to Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts and then took a bus from there to Nashua High School South.

Capt. Matthew R. DiLullo was the officer in charge of running the program. I was asked in my position as civilian aide to the Secretary of the Army to come and say a few words at the celebration. Those few minutes turned into three hours as the troops were late in arriving.

Both New Hampshire senators sent letters that were read and Congressmen Charlie Bass and Jeb Bradley were in attendance. Mayor Bernie Streeter lead off the program.

DiLullo asked me if I would pick out some people to read the letters from those not in attendance. I had state Sen. David Gottesman read Gov. John Lynch's letter. I read U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg's letter, Sgt. Maj. Paul Chevalier read U.S. Sen. John Sununu's letter, state Rep. Bette R. Lasky read U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy's letter, and state Rep. David Smith read Bradley's letter. (He read the letter before the congressman arrived.)

With the delays, DiLullo asked me to help again. I invited state Sen. Joseph Foster of Nashua, Chevalier, the commander of the American Legion in Londonderry and several other people to speak.

State Sen. Joe Kenney wore his dress Marine uniform. Kenney returned from Iraq several months ago and is still in the Marines. Actually, Kenney was in this same company from 1986-87.

The last to speak before the Marines arrived was Dick Attardo whose son, Anthony, was one of the Marines coming in.

In trying to spread the time out, I called Attardo out of the audience to say what he was

feeling at this moment, seeing that he hadn't seen his son in months. Since I received my invitation I had spoken with Attardo several times.

The magic moment came when those Marines walked into the gym. Over a thousand friends and family members were hysterical with joy.

There were 13 Marines from Nashua. They were called forward and Mayor Bernie Streeter presented each with a key to the city. The Marines were Lance Cpl. Anthony Attardo, Lance Cpl. Derek Bice, Lance Cpl. Peter Boisvert, Lance Cpl. Timothy Cunha, Lance Cpl. Caleb Gilbert, Lance Cpl. Mishael Gregoire, Cpl. Gerard Ditolla, Sgt. Ross Daghir, Cpl. Nicholas Koutalakis, Lance Cpl. Douglas Krailo, Chief Warrant Officer 4 Brian Keavy, Lance Cpl. Gregory McNulty and Lance Cpl. Nicholas Nadeau.

While the Marines were in formation, there were very brief remarks.

It was tough holding the families and friends away from the Marines as they had to fall into ranks.

We all watched as they came in. Toward the end of the line, Marines were pushing others in wheelchairs and several came in on crutches. Everyone's hearts were in their throats.

In looking at the Marines I thought, "They are so young some probably don't even shave." Then it clicked, most of us veterans were once young.

When the Marines were in formation, three were called forward. They were presented with Purple Hearts for being wounded in action by Mayor Streeter, myself, Bass and Bradley.

When the formation was dismissed, it turned into pandemonium and chaos. I don't think I have ever seen anything like it. Everyone was hugging and kissing. Several of these Marines had never seen their new babies.

That night, Nashua was filled with a lot of love. Let us not forget the two Marines who didn't come home.

God bless our troops.

*Dennis,
Nashua*

- To honor veterans on Veterans Day weekend, the Actorsingers Community Theater in Nashua, celebrating its 52nd season, is offering free tickets to veterans for the Friday and Saturday performances of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical "Evita." The show will be performed at the Edmund Keefe auditorium, 117 Elm St., Nashua, at 8 p.m. both evenings. At the door only, all veterans who show proper identification will be admitted free of charge. For more information on the show, visit www.actorsingers.org or call 320-1870.

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